

[By Howard Weiss-Tisman](#)

PUTNEY -- Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., were in the Dominican Republic, Monday, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps.

Over the last five decades, the Peace Corps has sent more than 200,000 volunteers to 139 countries around the world and the group's roots extend all the way back to Windham County.

Sargent Shriver founded the Peace Corps, and Shriver's experience in 1935 traveling in Europe as a member of the Experiment in International Living is believed to be one of the factors that inspired him.

"Sargent Shriver always told me how impressed he was with the people in Vermont," Leahy said from the Dominican Republic on Monday during a conference call with reporters. "It was President [John F.] Kennedy's idea to begin with and once Sargent got into it, he used the experiences he had with the group in southern Vermont."

Leahy is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Department of State and Foreign Operations, which helps write the annual budget bill for the Peace Corps and other foreign operations of the U.S. government.

The Experiment in International Living, which eventually became the School for International Training, started in 1932 to give high school students a way to explore other cultures.

Shriver was one of the first students to travel with the program.

After the Peace Corps started, some of the early training sessions for the Peace Corps volunteers were held at the Experiment in International Living in Putney, and then

Dummerston. "SIT grew out of the training for Peace Corps volunteers," said Shawna Parker, director of marketing for the SIT Study Abroad program. "We were founded as a place to train Peace Corps volunteers and SIT continues to train students in international education all over the world."

After President Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1960, one of the first trainings was held at the Experiment in International Learning campus in Putney.

The group of volunteers was preparing to go to Pakistan.

Bob George, who now lives in Brattleboro, was a young volunteer in 1961 who took part in the training for the Pakistan trip.

George was living in Connecticut at the time and he was among a group of about 30 volunteers who traveled from all over the country to take part in the new U.S. program.

The trip had a great impact on George and he ended up working for SIT.

"After President Kennedy established the Peace Corps, people wanted to be a part of it," he said. "We had nurses and auto mechanics and brick layers and engineers. They came from all over and when we got to Pakistan, we saw people who were very poor, who had next to nothing, and I came back and said we should be doing more."

Donald Batchelder, who had a number of roles at SIT, said the Peace Corps training was a major reason that the Experiment in International Living left its small campus in Putney and moved to the site in Dummerston where it is now located.

The School for International Training was established in 1964, and continues to maintain close connections with the Peace Corps.

Returning Peace Corps volunteers enroll in graduate programs at the school, which is now known as World Learning and many of the international learning skills developed at the school make their way into Peace Corps training.

"When Sargent Shriver was first looking for someplace to train people to learn in other countries and cultures, he called us," Batchelder remembered. "When he was looking for a place to train people to go to Pakistan, no one else wanted to do it and so we set it up and ran it." Leahy and Welch were in the Dominican Republic Monday as part of a Caribbean trip that includes a stop in Haiti.

The two members of Vermont's Congressional delegation met with Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams and they visited a youth development Peace Corps project.

On Monday night they attended an embassy event to commemorate the Peace Corps' 50th anniversary.

Vermont has continued to play an outsized role in Peace Corps services.

The state led the nation in 2010 in the number of Peace Corps volunteers per capita and Burlington was second in the country in the number of Peace Corps volunteers per capita among U.S. metropolitan areas.

In the 2010 study, Burlington sent 12.02 volunteers for every 100,000 residents.

"I think those numbers tell a lot about the spirit of Vermont," Welch said. "America is a young nation, and a hopeful nation, and we have a lot to offer. We can teach people to do what is impossible to do."